

VZCZCXRO9688
RR RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHGB #2751/01 2400727
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 270727Z AUG 08
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9078
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002751

SIPDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (PAR MARK CORRECTED)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/27/2018
TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: NINEWA: A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY CONSIDERS ITS FUTURE
IN A MUSLIM MAJORITY COUNTRY AND IN THE SHADOW OF THE
BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY

BAGHDAD 00002751 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Ninewa PRT Leader Alex Laskaris: Reasons 1.4 b&d

This is a Ninewa Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) message.

¶1. (C) Summary: Two prominent Assyrian Christian leaders in Tel Kaif district told the PRT they want to remain a part of Ninewa Province, believing that the KRG is increasingly authoritarian, likely to split on tribal lines, and more prone to Islamic extremism than is currently apparent. By chance, we also met an Assyrian Christian peshmerga with a KDP identity card who asserted that Christians would be better off under the KRG. We saw new construction in Al Qosh funded by KRG Minister of Finance Sarkis Aghajan, and spent time with Christians with a far more tolerant view of Islam than some of their brethren. Finally, we met an old man who remembered his Jewish neighbors and still keeps the key to a long-abandoned synagogue. End Summary.

Relations with the KRG

¶2. (C) On August 18, PRT leader traveled to Al Qosh, Tel Kaif district and met the mayor and high ranking member of the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) Basim Bello. Mayor Bello was joined by fellow ADM member Sargon Nimrud, who runs Ashor Television. The reason for the trip was to discuss outreach to local NGOs, both in Al Qosh and its nearest neighbor, a Yezidi village some five miles away. Al Qosh lies in Ninewa Province, but is located in an area under the control of the KRG.

¶3. (C) Like most of our Assyrian interlocutors, Bello asserted that the Assyrians were the original inhabitants of the Ninewa Plain. He stressed, however, that his community had always enjoyed good relations with Muslims, emphasizing that he and most of the Assyrians understood the distinction between true believers in the faith and the violent extremists. Bello observed that all religions, including his own, have radical elements. Bello maintained that the Christians of the Ninewa Plain had always supported the Kurds, saying that the ADM fought with the Kurdish parties against Saddam. Bello also said that the ADM worked as de facto peacekeepers between the PUK and KDP during the fighting of 1995-6, when the KDP and Iraqi army elements expelled the PUK from Erbil.

¶4. (C) According to Bello, the rift between the ADM and the Kurdish parties began in 2003 as the KRG attempted to expand its political control further into Christian areas of the Ninewa plain. Bello said the KRG is following a policy of encroachment into the Ninewa plain by attempting to establish &facts on the ground by moving Kurds into Christian areas;

stacking district and sub district councils with un-elected Kurdish members; and, in the case of Al Qosh, spending lavishly, particularly on church and church-related construction.

15. (C) Bello had raised the issue of stacking district and sub-district councils with us the previous week. His own personal security aside -- he believes he is under direct threat from the senior leadership of the KDP -- Bello said his greatest concern is the prospect of irreversible modifications to councils that would give the KRG political control to go along with its effective occupation of the area. He said the KRG is acting in violation of the 2008 Provincial Powers Law by adding seats to existing councils. In Hamdaniya, he said two KRG supporters have been added to the council: Hana Elyas (PUK) and Faiel Jar-alla Hamo (KDP).

In Bartalla sub-district, Bello said the KRG has supported the addition of four new members, a Kurd, an Assyrian and two Sunnis. The Assyrian is reportedly the uncle of Fr. Ayman Dana, a prominent Bartalla cleric who supports the KDP. As we drove through Al Qosh, Bello pointed out buildings under construction: a convent dormitory, a headquarters for the church administration, and renovations of churches, all paid for he said by Aghajan.

16. (C) Bello also raised continuing Kurdish intimidation, including a personal threat made against him by the KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani. Bello explained what he sees as an increasingly bellicose KRG policy as the result of the Kurds, desire not to lose what was gained in terms of self-rule after the first Gulf War. As a result, there is an ongoing trend toward authoritarianism in the KRG, according to Bello, adding that the Kurds are a highly tribalized society, prone to in-fighting and more Islamic extremism than was currently apparent. He said that, radicals notwithstanding, there is greater tolerance for the Christian faith among Iraqi Arabs than among Iraqi Kurds.

BAGHDAD 00002751 002.2 OF 002

17. (C) We found at least one Assyrian who believed Al Qosh would be better off as a part of the KRG. We met an Assyrian Christian, an elderly man dressed in full Kurdish regalia, who invited us into his house and insisted on showing us the bullet holes in his arm and feeling the shrapnel embedded in the base of his skull) all wounds sustained during his service as a peshmerga. He even showed us his KDP identity document. We did not know what to make of the man dressed like a Kurd, but with a living room filled with images of Christ, the Pope, the Barzanis and Cardinal Delly. Afterwards, Bello explained that, Kurdish fashion ensemble notwithstanding, he was an Assyrian Christian and) he added) a traitor.

Central Government a Non-entity in Al Qosh

18. (C) Bello also gave some background on the new Minister of Communication, Faroukh Abd al-Qader. According to Bella, Faroukh is from Mosul and has a reputation for honesty and effectiveness dating back to the Saddam Hussein era. Bella noted, however, that both Farouk and his Iraqi Islamic Party have radical tendencies. Bello said Farouk was well-known in Ninewa as a competent civil servant, adding that he would await results from the new special envoy from the office of the Prime Minister before deciding which aspect of his background would be dispositive.

Echoes of a Vanished Religious Minority

19. (C) While on the subject of the future viability of religious minorities, we asked Bello if there ever had been a Jewish community in Al Qosh. He said that there had been a community before his time, and that there was an old synagogue in the town. We took him up on his offer to show

us the building, which is in very bad shape, but as a result of neglect and the passage of time rather than vandalism. There was a sarcophagus in the center of the temple, covered by one of the last parts of the stone roof still standing. Inside, we were told, were the remains of a notable rabbi, the son of parents taken from Jerusalem by Assyrians. (Note: Some scholars believe that the prophet Nahum, one of two sent to punish Ninewa is buried in Al Qosh. The other is Jonah, whose tomb is -- according to legend -- in Mosul.)

¶10. (C) An old Assyrian man approached us outside the synagogue and offered to unlock the bolt on the front door. He said that he was 75 years old, and remembered the Jewish families of the neighborhood from his youth. He recited their names and a couple words of Hebrew, and told us that a few years ago, a descendent of Al Qosh's Jewish community had returned to see his father's village. From that traveler, the old man learned that all but two of the 85 people who left in the aftermath of the 1948 Israeli war of independence were now deceased.

¶11. (C) Comment: Bello is one of the few overtly anti-KRG leaders living in KRG-controlled areas of Ninewa Province. As such, we assume he is indeed under threat. We will follow his security closely, raising it with our interlocutors as necessary. One of the real challenges to our work is that we alone appear to acknowledge that reasonable people could disagree on something so complicated as relations with the KRG. Even Bello, who we find to be a calm and reasonable interlocutor, ascribes the basest of motives to those who disagree with him. When we asked him why the Christian community cannot simply agree to disagree, he said, "in that, we're all Iraqis."

¶12. (C) The abandoned and crumbling synagogue was a startling reminder of the fact that religious minorities - of any faith - are at risk in Iraq. It was heartening to hear an old man say "shalom" and recite the names of his boyhood friends) Moshe, Itzakh, etc... - but sobering to know that that knowledge will not outlive him. We will try to interest the provincial government, UNESCO and NGOs in the synagogue; it too is a piece of Iraq's national patrimony and diverse religious heritage worth preserving. End Comment.
BUTENIS